

NOTES

The "You're Going to Die!" Joke as a Means of Expressing Homophobia

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In his doctoral dissertation, Joseph P. Goodwin shows how gay folklore is used "as a means of communication and identification, as an aid to subcultural cohesion, as ways of coping with conflict both within the subculture and between the gay community and the straight world" (1984:xi). I am currently examining a joke which appears to function in most of the ways suggested by Goodwin above, except that it operates from the viewpoint of straight males in reaction to gay culture. I recorded five variants of the joke in North Central Texas from 1985 to 1987, all told by males, and a British television version, recounted by a female Chicagoan in 1987. A typical example of the Texas variants follows:

Two ole guys were out in the pasture and they was messin' around out there, and one of them thought he'd go take a shit. He just squatted there by a bush, and a little old rattlesnake was there and bit him on the balls.

"My God, I've been bitten on the balls." He said to his partner, he said, "My God, help me, I've been bit."

And his partner said, "My Lord, let me run to the truck and call it in and find out what to do." And he went back to the truck and called and got the hospital on the radio, and the ambulance was on the way and all this, and he said [to the doctor], "Whatdaya want me to do?"

And the doctor said, "What you want to do is go back down there and take your pocketknife and cut a little square and go down there and suck all the poison out."

And he said, "What happens if I don't?"

"Well, if you don't, he's going to DIE."

So he goes back down there, and the guy's laying on the ground, and he said, "What are you going to do? What did the doctor say?"

"He said you're going to DIE!"

[Transcribed from tape recording. Collected from a 38-year-old male paint-shop owner and snake handler, on July 3, 1985, in the bar of the Holiday Inn in Sweetwater, Texas, during a three-hour conversation at a table with three other men and one woman.]

The other Texas versions I collected are similar to the one above, varying in such details as why a doctor cannot treat the afflicted person; for example, in one version, the only doctor in town is busy delivering a baby. However, the uniform element in all the versions is the punchline, "You're going to die!"--always pronounced with a hissing, almost gleeful accent on the word "die!" The homophobic element is obvious; the implication of all the joke variants is that men would rather watch a good friend die than perform an act which would resemble the fellatio commonly performed by homosexuals.

One of the persons who told me this joke, a 46-year-old county commissioner, said it is often told by rattlesnake hunters on hunting trips: "They'll be out there around a den. Somebody will squat down and sit down to rest. And somebody'll say, 'You better watch it. You heard about the two hunters out hunting....' After telling the joke he said, "So if somebody squats down around the [rattlesnake] den, you better have a real good buddy," i.e., someone who would be willing to undergo the humiliation that such an act would cause a typical North Central Texan heterosexual in a predominantly heterosexual society. Another person, a young radio executive, commented, "If you're with your best friend, you say, 'I hope that a snake doesn't bite you on your wee-wee, because I will not suck the venom out.'"

Alan Dundes discusses how folklore "provides socially sanctioned means of expressing one's anxiety":

Frequently the means are sanctioned only because they involve symbolic disguise. One can joke where one cannot speak directly. In the United States, there are many jokes about sex, religion, and politics. If one realizes that a cluster of jokes . . . can reveal a source of anxiety, one can see that an analysis of the symbolic content of jokes may provide important insights into the nature of society. [Dundes 1968:44]

What anxiety could the straight male be expressing in the joke under consideration? Goodwin, in his dissertation, says: "Many people are frightened by anything unfamiliar (especially when it is related to sexuality), and homosexuality has become an ideal target for the hostility arising from these fears" (1984: 306). Although gay culture was a largely "invisible part of our society" at the time Goodwin wrote his dissertation (1984), he acknowledges in his preface that the culture is becoming more and more visible. I suggest that the more visible the gay community becomes, the more anxiety it causes straight males who then vent that anxiety in expressive forms. Just as gays rely on folklore as "a pressure valve, a means of conveying veiled insults, and a method of confronting and expressing prejudices" (Goodwin 1984: 227), and just as "these attitudes are widely expressed in gay folklore, often veiled as humor" (Goodwin 1984:227), so increasingly is the hostile reaction of straights against the growingly visible gay culture veiled in folkloric disguise such as the "You're going to die!" joke. Rather than going out and beating up homosexuals, the straight males kill them off in jokes.

This rationale corresponds with that suggested by G. Legman:

[T]he punchline joke must always end with a verbal climax, a surprise witticism or unexpected retort (the punch), in which the interlocutor or the butt is humiliated and sometimes annihilated.

. . . This is not so much telling a story as it is setting up a backdrop--often freighted with anxiety for both teller and listener--against which the butt is scapegoated, sacrificed, and exploded in a cruel and explosive final spoken line, like the cutting of a throat. Or, even if there is no spoken line . . . the butt is just as certainly mocked, or harmed and destroyed nonetheless, and must die (be humiliated) and disappear from the stage. The only person who remains alive to tell the tale is the person who has told the tale, the tale-teller. [Legman 1975:28-29]

Thus, the male who tells the homophobic joke not only deals with the source of his anxiety, he also emerges alive and unscathed himself. Legman later goes so far as to say that "all of the homosexual jokes, are elaborated by people who hate and fear homosexuals, or by homosexuals who hate and are willing to dirty themselves" (1975:70).

A British version recounted by a female Chicagoan is quite different from the Texas version and yet its purpose seems strikingly similar--to humiliate and/or annihilate the homosexual:

It was "David Allen at Large." He's a British comedian. He has a half-hour show that is filled with--he does some stand-up routines, although he's sitting down--stand-up routines and skits. This was a Sherlock Holmes-Doctor Watson skit. And it was not a snake; it was a poison dart. What happened is Watson was hit in the rear end or the privates--I'm not real sure--with a poison dart. And Holmes is kind of leaning over him and says, "My God, Watson, you've been hit by such-and-such poison, and if it is not sucked out immediately, you're going to die."

And so Watson says, "Well, what's going to happen, Holmes?"

And Holmes says, "You're going to die."

[Transcribed from tape recording of a telephone conversation on December 9, 1987; the informant is a 34-year-old female research fellow with a Chicago legal foundation; she said she saw the program on public television during the past year. She recounted the television version in response to my discussion of Texas variants.]

How this joke actually functions in British society, however, I am not qualified to say. Interestingly, this only variant that I have collected from a female does not include the usual exaggerated emphasis on the word "die" at the end. The indifferent tone in her rendering of the punchline corresponds with her liberal-minded "live-and-let-live" attitude towards homosexuals (as opposed to the attitude of Texas males towards homosexuals). However, the lack of emphasis on the word "die" in this instance may simply reflect Sherlock Holmes' characteristically dry style of delivery.

Just as gays use folklore "as means of communication and identification," so do straight males. A person's reaction to the joke--laughter, nonlaughter--could give clues to his or her feelings about homosexuality. Shared laughter is certainly one way to establish cultural cohesion. And just as gays use folklore to cope with conflicts between the gay community and the straight world, so conversely do straights.

Why would the mere increased visibility of gays cause anxiety to straight males? Perhaps the straight male unconsciously fears more than anything the possibility of his own giving in to homosexuality. Roger D. Abrahams discusses how "expressive folklore assists in maintaining the status quo by giving a 'name' to the threatening forces . . . giving the impression that the forces are being controlled" (1971:18). The straight male relies on folklore not only to reaffirm his own convictions but also to influence others; straight males learn from each other how they are expected to behave in their world. Likewise, Goodwin asserts that "gay people must rely primarily on each other to learn how to relate effectively within the gay world. Much of this information is passed on in the form of folklore" (1984:3). As Abrahams states, the power exists "in the ability to objectify the situation in symbols" (1971:27).

Cultural expectations are thus set up and reinforced on both sides.

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